MAKING THE BEST OF THE U.S. OPEN

Preparing Oakmont for the U.S. Open gave superintendent Latshaw the opportunity to correct course flaws.

By MAUREEN HREHOCIK,
Associate Editor

Ask Paul Latshaw what a little planning, foresight and a lot of hard work can do and he'll tell you it can turn hosting the 1983 U.S. Open from a possible nightmare into a dream.

In a little more than a year, the superintendent of the 300-acre Oakmont Country Club in Oakmont, PA, has his course the way he wants it with two months to spare before thousands of golf enthusiasts converge on the course and the international television eye begins its scrutiny. Massive bunker renovation has been done, fairways restructured, a complete aerification process and an enlargement of the gallery area have also been completed.

"We studied the course in the summer of 1981 in preparation for the Open this June," Latshaw explained. "A committee was formed and we decided three major things had to be done with the course.

"First, because of the tremendous number of bunkers (about 160), many being off the tees 150 to 170 yards, we felt we were penalizing our golfers, so we took enough sand out to be able to mow around them with a five-gang mower.

"The second thing we addressed was gallery control. We have a fairly big course, but some of the holes are tight. We didn't have gallery room on the right side of hole number 1, so we decided to take the hole and move the bunker closer to the fairway so the crowd can get through."

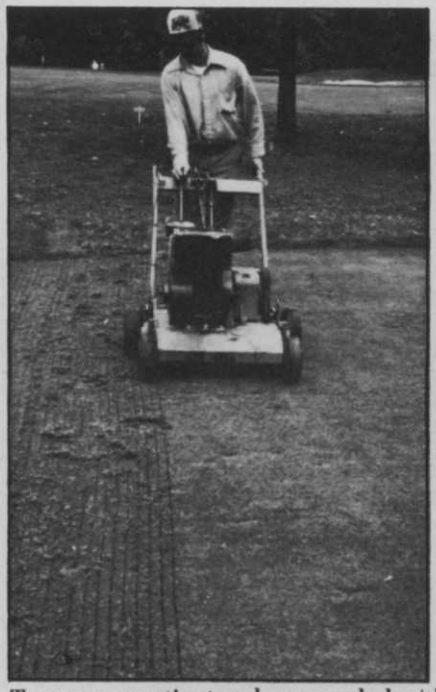
Latshaw explained he did this "flopping" procedure on the first, second and 18th holes where the largest pedestrian traffic problems would have to be maintained. He said it gave him about 20 more yards at each hole.

To facilitate handling the gallery even more, Latshaw and his men cleared away two wooded areas and built a bridge over the gulley that linked them.

"The woods were really overpowering from the 10th green to the 11th tee. With a gallery it would be hard to get to because of the gulley. Our 10th hole is the most difficult so it would naturally be one that a lot of people would be interested in. Clearing the brush and building the bridge reduced the bottleneck. We did much the

continued on page 34

Bill Rose, Paul Latshaw, and Joe Duich *(top, left to right) show their pleasure about work in progress (bottom) as members play the course.*



Tees were verticut and overseeded *with Penneagle creeping bentgrass.*

Verticutting to soil depth *insured seed contact with soil.*

same thing on the 14th hole; we regraded the area and cleaned out the woods which gave us more gallery room."

The third concern was with the heavy Western Pennsylvania clay soil. "Some of our bunkers are so deep we had to pump water out of them. Others, we had to dig deeper," Latshaw said. "We added drainage systems to ⅓ of our bunkers.

During the renovation, which took place from the summer of '81 until December of '82, Latshaw had another challenge at the back of his mind; that of preserving the original design of the course as much as possible. Oakmont was founded in 1903 by W.C. Fownes who structured the course much like a seacoast course in Scotland, one of the reasons for all the bunkers. The sandy seacoast was even copied by having sand ditches at various places on the course.

"Those ditches make it really difficult because all of the maintenance on them has to be done by hand. It also changed the drainage patterns."

Even with the disadvantages, Latshaw replaced the original sand ditches on holes 2 and 15 to preserve the authenticity of the course.

"They provide a real good hazard," Latshaw said jokingly. "The changes have been so natural in all phases of the renovation that most members don't even know we've done them."

All of the finishing touches in the project were done by hand; in fact, Latshaw estimates that the lion's share of the work was hand done. It was a slow process. The equipment used was mainly a Ford front-end loader backhoe and a "boxscraper" mounted on a three-point hitch tractor. Because of all the excess soil coming out of the bunkers, a dump truck was used extensively. Two Jacobsen UV-4s provided the four-wheel drive needed to go down in and back out of the bunkers. A Ditch Witch dug drains. "We used a lot of rakes, shovels and back power, too," he said.

All of the work was done by Latshaw and his full-time crew of three.

"The committee was under the impression we could do it all ourselves, which, manually, we did. But I did call in Fred Garbin, a local golf course architect, for his expertise. He was a tremendous asset.

"He had a lot of patience and I can be difficult to work with at times," Latshaw joked.

Dr. Joseph Duich, Professor of Turfgrass Science at Penn State University also consulted on the seeding of the project.

"Joe and I are good friends," Latshaw said. "He's the right guy to have around on all aspects of a project like this."

In order to have the golf course in the finest condition possible for the tournament, all of the fairways were aerified with a Ryan's Greensaire.

"Normally, we use this for greens and tees, but found it had a number of advantages being used on the fairways," Latshaw said. "For one thing, it brought up lots of soil and made a good seedbed for our overseeding program. I'm a firm believer in Penneagle creeping bentgrass. It can really compete with poa annua."

continued on page 82

U.S. OPEN *from page 34*

Latshaw is also a firm believer in soil testing. Working with a local soil company, Brookside Laboratories, once a year Latshaw gets a reading of his soil composition.

"It's really the only accurate way of understanding what the soil needs," he says. "If we need a trace element we usually go out and get that trace element. We have a very good local source of sulphate of potash. We buy Scotts' nitrogen. Off-season, I'm a firm believer in late fall and dormant feed programs usually with sulphur-coated urea and amonium sulphate. I've found I can save money by treating specific problems. We're really getting by with low fertilizer rates.

When Latshaw started at Oakmont eight years ago, the soil was not properly balanced. The calcium/magnesium ratio was bad and their was a serious potassium deficiency. The ground was also low in manganese and boron. On the other hand, the levels of copper and zinc were excessive.

"We've made tremendous progress getting everything balanced," Latshaw says. "I've always believed the key to fertility is soil balance." Latshaw also has a problem with poa annua bentgrass near the fairways and found that overseeding them with perennial ryegrass has kept the problem in check.

Latshaw had another challenge . . . that of preserving the original design of the course as much as possible.

"It also gives good contrast in color between the light green and the dark green," Latshaw said.

With all of the fairways recontoured and the videocables installed, Latshaw has only one more big project to complete. That is to edge all the bunkers and get the sand at a uniform depth throughout.

Latshaw is one superintendent who uses a triplex mower. He feels the texture of the surface improves playability according to the golfers who use his course and far outweighs the disadvantages of time and expense.

"I've always cut large aprons in front of greens," Latshaw said. "I have a Toro 84 and started using it on a few of the fairways. The membership liked it so much they wanted it done on all the fairways. When you figure our fungicide program has gone way down and the people really like the playing surface, I think the cost is justified. The cost is one thing, but people come to a golf course to play, and if they don't like what they're playing on, they won't come. I think that out of necessity within the next few years, they'll come out with a five-gang mower with grasscatchers. There really is a need for it." **WTT**